

Design and Development of Ballybunnion Golf club



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Development of the Course

From local information, I believe that the first layout of golf holes in Ballybunnion took place in 1893. The men involved were officers of The Black Watch Regiment - Capt. M. Westropp, Limerick City Artillery and Capt. E. W. Willington, The Prince of Wales Regiment (Royal Canadians) stationed at Maryboro' (now known as Portlaoise) who were holidaying in Ballybunnion at the time and were staying at the Castle Hotel where the first meeting of the first club took place on the 18th August 1893. (The information on the likelihood of these being the men involved was given to me by Mr. Tommy Smyth, Archivist with The Black Watch Museum, Perth Scotland who I corresponded with and also had a few telephone conversations).

The first Minutes of this Club are dated 4th March 1896 and those Minutes contain an account of the Listowel/Ballybunnion Light Railway (better known as "The Lartigue") in the person of The General Manager, Mr. Patrick McCarthy going to the expense "... of bringing down the Professional to lay out the grounds." Who this man was and what he laid out is not recounted. The last recorded account of this Club is in its accounts on 13th August 1898. Obviously it was in financial difficulties and faded out of existence.

Having read that "Old Tom Morris" was thought to have been involved in the design of the course mentioned above, I contacted Mr. David Joy who has amassed a lot of information on the career of Old Tom Morris. During conversations with him about the supposed Morris involvement with Ballybunnion, he told me that having looked through his information he thought it highly un-likely that Old Tom Morris was ever in Ballybunnion. I also find it hard to believe that a visit from such a well known figure as Morris would have gone un-recorded. I do not believe that Old Tom Morris had any involvement with Ballybunnion. However, he did visit and redesign Lahinch Golf course during 1894.

In 1906 Capt. Lionel Lloyd Hewson laid out a 9 hole course which was much altered and extended to twelve holes under Capt. Hewson's direction up until 1926. I believe that by 1926 the course had 9 official holes for competitions and three extra holes for leisure golf. In 1926 Mr Fred Smith, Golf Architect of Carters Tested Seeds Limited of Raynes Park Surrey, added to the existing holes and in 1927 the 18 hole Course was opened for play.

In 1936 Tom Simpson redesigned 3 holes and carried out work on 13 holes in all and would have comprised a lot of subtle changes to the course. The day to day work was carried out under the supervision of Mr. Campbell who was a Head Greenskeeper with Suttons. Simpson also suggested that in the future the 11th hole (present 16 hole) which he described as a "rather indifferent hole" could be improved by "going up the valley to the left to find a green". This suggestion was carried out and over seen by John McAllister (Golf Architect) in 1949/50. Mr. Mc Allister also did minor alterations on other courses on the East coast of Ireland.

In 2000 Tom Watson redesigned the 7th green, re-aligned the 5th tee box and added 14 bunkers.

As far as I'm concerned there was no further involvement by anybody else in the design of the Links. I had read of the possibility of Mr. James Braid being involved and I contacted The James Braid Golfing Society. Their historian carried out a great deal of research on the supposed link with Ballybunnion and had concluded that there was no substance to the claim. The fact that the Club had also contacted Mr. Braid as well as Mr. Simpson in 1936 regarding getting advice on changes to the course may have given rise to that belief.

Down through the years the Club itself carried out numerous improvements to make the Course more 'user friendly'.

Development of the Club

On 19th August 1893, the following article appeared in The Limerick Chronicle newspaper:

“The opening meeting of the Ballybunnion Golf Club was held on the 18th. Inst. at the Castle Hotel, where it was decided to request Lord Listowel to allow himself to be nominated President, while Mr. Curling of Newcastlewest, and Mr. Creagh of Listowel were elected Vice-Presidents. Mr. Moran of Ennismore, and Mr. D’Arcy of Ballybunnion were chosen Hon/Sec. and Hon Treasurer respectively. A vote of thanks was then passed to Mr. Hewson, who very generously permits the use of the lands to the Club rent free. This announcement will excite much interest among the increasing numbers of the votaries of this fine game, since at Ballybunnion they will find advantages that are rarely obtainable. A first rate ground, a charming watering place, easily reached, where they will be most congenially lodged by Mrs. Kangley at The Castle, or at any other of the numerous hotels in the town. 12 greens have been laid out upon the links, a number of which may be increased to the standard 18, should the members so wish. The greens all lie among the Sandhills, the turf is of the springiest, and the course offers every variety of golfing incident. Persons wishing to join the club are requested to communicate with the Honorary Treasurer, Mr. N. D’Arcy Ballybunnion”.

The above information supplied by Mr. James Woulfe News Editor, Limerick Leader. Mr. Woulfe’s Grandfather Mr. James Clarke was Captain of the Club in 1932 and President from 1958 to 1963.

The first Ballybunnion Golf Club came into existence in the year 1896. The original Minute Book of the Committee has been preserved and the first committee meeting is recorded as of the 4th March 1896. The First Honorary Secretary was Mr. C. Mark Montserrat, a local estate agent, who was succeeded on 20th January 1897 by Mr. Patrick McCarthy, Manager of Listowel & Ballybunnion Railway Company (“The Lartigue”). However, despite the best efforts of the early enthusiasts, the original Club did not survive very long and the last recorded entry in the Minute Book in Mr. McCarthy’s handwriting, is dated 13th August 1898. After that all is “blank” and it is believed the difficulty was the usual one, finance. The period of oblivion was not to last forever.

Mr. McCarthy, (who had been Hon./Sec of the first Club in 1897/'98) with Mr. John Macaulay, Millers agent, who also had been a member of the first club, along with Mr. Benjamin Johnston who was a sub-agent for the Bank of Ireland in Listowel, Colonel Bartholomew a retired India Army Officer and retired to live in Ballybunnion, founded the present Club in 1906. I think it is fair to assume that after eight years of being un-tended the land would have returned to its original state. Fortunately we do have a copy of the 1906 map of the 9 holes course laid out by Captain Lionel Lloyd Hewson on behalf of the Founders of the present Club.

Due to the popularity of Ballybunnion as a golf venue it was felt necessary to extend to an 18 Holes Course. The Club secured an Overdraft of £2000 with the Listowel branch of The Bank of Ireland in 1926. The Marconi Company had ceased its Wireless Operations in Ballybunnion by then and their 72 acres of land was for sale. The Club bought the property with the notion of extending the golf links onto this land but before making a final decision they decided to get advice from the James Carter Company of Raynes Park in London. Their golf course Architect Mr. Fred Smith came to Ballybunnion. The club directed him to inspect the Marconi land and to also inspect the Sandhills land with a view to extending the course to an 18 hole one. Mr. Smith carried out a thorough inspection of the Marconi property and the Sandhills land and in his report strongly recommended that the extension take place through the Sandhills land. The Club took his advice and he set about laying out the course.

The everyday work was carried out under the direction of Mr. Mowatt who with a local workforce completed the 18 hole course and in 1927 the Fred Smith course was opened for play. Mr. Ben Johnstone one of the Founders of the present Club, Hon. Secretary, played a very important role in securing the overdraft on behalf of the Club. The rate of interest on this money was 6%. For a number of years the Club paid off only the interest on the overdraft, the surplus was used to keep the temporary staff employed for the season, to work on into the autumn months making further improvements to the Links.

In 1936 Ballybunnion was chosen as the venue for the forthcoming Irish Men's Close Championship in 1937. Immediately on being made aware of this development, the Club contacted Mr. James Braid, Messrs Colt Alison & Morrison, & Messrs T. Simpson & Co. The Simpson Co. was chosen to do the necessary work. Mr. Tom Simpson arrived in Ballybunnion in September 1936 in his Silver coloured Rolls Royce and booked into the Castle Hotel. He was accompanied by Miss Molly Gourlay who was a member of the Board of Directors of the Simpson firm. Mr. Simpson inspected the Course and was very impressed with its design, especially its skeletal layout. He submitted two proposals of alterations, "Schedule A" which was costed at £1090 and "Schedule B" which was costed at £650. The Club opted for "Schedule B". Mr. Simpson set about laying out the alterations as described in his "Schedule B" report with Mr. Campbell, Suttons Seeds Company Head Greenskeeper, who had been described as the greatest greenskeeper in Great Britain at the time. Once the laying work was completed by Simpson and Campbell the day to day work was carried out under the supervision of Mr. Campbell, who was a Head Greenskeeper with the Suttons.

The Land

The years 1925/'26/'27 were the most progressive in the development of Ballybunnion Golf Club. The small village of Ballybunnion had in recent years suffered two devastating economic events. In 1922 the "Marconi wireless Station had ceased operations with the loss of forty permanent jobs and 1924 saw The Listowel/Ballybunnion Light Railway system, better known as the "Lartigue"(so called after its designer), go into receivership. Since 1888 this Railway had been the vital link for Ballybunnion with the outside world. Visitors would arrive at Limerick/Waterford Railway Station at Listowel and would then board the unique Lartigue train to journey to Ballybunnion. Boarding house owners who had depended on the Lartigue to bring visitors to Ballybunnion were very close to poverty. Property values had fallen by about 50%.

Remarkably it was in this gloomy financial atmosphere that the members of Ballybunnion Golf Club decided on a bold venture, namely to build an 18 Hole golf links. Responsibility for all aspects of the venture was placed in the hands of Mr. William (Willie) McCarthy. To finance the venture arrangements for an overdraft of £2000 were agreed with the Listowel branch of Bank of Ireland. Mr. Ben Johnstone was very helpful in acquiring the loan for the Club. A quote from the Annual report of 1925/'6 made by Mr. John Macaulay, President of the club and Chairman of the Meeting explains a lot regarding the financial position of the Club at the time, "Naturally your Bankers required security for some £2000 of an overdraft, this matter was got over through the kindness of several Members and mark you now Members coming forward and volunteering their assistance to meet the expenditure. The action of the non-members particularly was highly praiseworthy and deserves the utmost thanks of the Club".

On behalf of the Club Willie McCarthy in 1926 bought the "Marconi" land which consisted of approximately 72 Acres. Having purchased the land, Mr. Freddy Smith, architect with the Carter Seeds Company of Raynes Park London was invited to come to Ballybunnion to advise on the extension. In his report he strongly advised "to extend through the Sandhills". At that time, the Club owned about 20 Acres of the Sandhills where the 9 Hole Links was laid out. The remainder of the land was leased from The Scottish Provident Institution. All of this land was located north of "Kitty's River.

Mr. Smith's design for the extension made it necessary for the Club to acquire about 70 Acres of the Sandhills land south of the river. 40 Acres of the land immediately below the river stretching from the road to the beach was owned by Mr. John Rattray. The Club negotiated a 99 years lease of this land in September 1926. The remaining Sandhills were the property of S. P. I. Willie McCarthy negotiated the combining of the 30 Acres of land south of the Rattray land with the land already leased north of the river needed for the proposed extension. He made it a condition that all of the land would be Freehold. The land (Approximately 95 Acres) was bought for £210. The ten pounds was a commission for the S.P.I. representative in Ireland Mr. Bracken, who lived in Dromahaire, Co. Leitrim.

Now that the Marconi land was not going to be required for a golf course the Club decided to designate the land along the Sandhill road as building sites. This land extended from the present

Sportsfield Road to Carmody's farm (now Green Valley Caravan Park). Willie McCarthy let it be known locally that the Club would be willing to sub-divide the remaining land and sell it off in lots as small as 5 Acres. All of the agricultural land and two building sites were sold within a matter of months. In the ensuing years the Club made a profit from selling the building sites.

Members who were deeply involved in what was then known as "The Ballybunnion Push" were Mr. John J. Macaulay, Mr. Edward F. Boylan, Hon/Sec, Mr. Robert A. Macaulay, Canon Adderly, Mr. W. H. Jeffares, Hon/ Treas. and a great advocate of golf in Ballybunnion and the first Honorary Member of the Club, designer of the 9 hole course in 1906, Captain Lionel Lloyd Hewson, M. V .O.

Of course no history of the progress of Ballybunnion Golf Club would be complete without recognising the contribution made by Mr. William (Willie) J. McCarthy. Mr. McCarthy, a Solicitor by profession who was also the proprietor of the Castle Hotel was unstinting in his efforts to progress the Club through some very difficult periods in our history, the civil unrest of the 1920s, the "Economic war" of the 1930s, and of course the Second world War. He looked after all the Clubs legal interests from the 1920s until the 1950s. The only payment I ever located was directed to his secretary for work she carried out on behalf of the Club. He visited the Club on an almost daily basis and consulted with the greenskeepers on work that needed to be done. He was Hon/Sec from 1928 to 1952, a truly remarkable unbroken personal contribution. At a Meeting held in "The Pavilion Ballroom" on Monday 16th June 1941 at 3P.M., Chaired by Mr. John Macaulay, President of the Club, the Ladies Branch was formed. The first Major Competition played on the course was the Irish Ladies Close in 1932.

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Map of Ballybunnion Golf Links

